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BOOK SECTION

# Theories and Conspiracy Theories

## BLACK BOX

*KAL 007 and the Superpowers.*

By Alexander Dallin.

130 pp. Berkeley:

University of California Press. \$14.95.

## KAL FLIGHT 007

*The Hidden Story.*

By Oliver Clubb.

174 pp. Sag Harbor, N.Y.:

The Permanent Press. \$16.95.

By Philip Taubman

**M**ORE than 18 months after Korean Air Lines flight 007 was shot down by a Soviet jet fighter and vanished into the Sea of Okhotsk, killing all 269 passengers and crew members, the plane's passage over Soviet territory remains one of the most puzzling and provocative mysteries in aviation history. Did the plane stray over the Kamchatka Peninsula and Sakhalin Island as it headed from Anchorage to Seoul because of mechanical problems or pilot error? Was the flight path, which took the plane hundreds of miles north and west of normal international air traffic lanes, an intentional deviation designed to save fuel or time? Or was the plane on a spying mission for a South Korean or American intelligence agency?

There are also questions about the response of the United States and the Soviet Union when the plane drifted off course. Did Soviet air defense authorities knowingly order the destruction of a commercial airliner? Or did they, as Moscow later asserted, think the Korean jumbo jet was an American surveillance plane? Assuming the United States did not send the South Korean plane on an intelligence-gathering mission, did American intelligence agencies nevertheless know that it was straying dangerously off course and that Soviet jets were in pursuit, but make no effort to alert the crew or civilian aviation agencies? After the plane was downed on Sept. 1, 1983, did the Reagan Administration distort and withhold information about the Soviet attack to gain political advantage from the incident?

Because the Boeing 747's flight recorder, or black box, was never recovered, aviation experts were unable to reconstruct the final hours of flight 007. The recorder, a nearly indestructible device installed on airplanes to preserve flight data, probably would have revealed whether the navigation equipment malfunctioned or was improperly programmed by the crew. Tape recordings of cockpit conversations might have shown whether the pilot knew he was off course.

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**T**HE lack of hard information has spawned many theories, some far-fetched, others plausible, most politically slanted, and all unsubstantiated. There is the suggestion, for example, that the Russians electronically lured the plane off course and shot it down so they could kill one of the passengers, Congressman Larry P. McDonald, Democrat of Georgia, chairman of the John Birch Society. Another proposition is that the pilot of flight 007, a former Korean Air Force officer, violated Russian airspace as a favor to American intelligence agencies that wanted to monitor the reactions of the Soviet air defense system. Like the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the fate of flight 007 has been used by all sorts of groups and people to prove preconceived points.

Oliver Clubb, a professor of political science at Syracuse University, adds little to the discussion in "KAL Flight 007: The Hidden Story." He makes the case for a spying mission with great passion and precision. Taking the most sinister view of the flight, one that cannot be sustained by the facts or even a reasonable degree of cynicism, Mr. Clubb asserts that the Korean plane was on a suicidal intelligence mission designed by a clique of right-wing officials to poison American-Soviet relations. His book is a polemic, and not a very good one.

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In "Black Box: KAL 007 and the Superpowers," Alexander Dallin, a Soviet expert and professor of history and political science at Stanford University, does an admirable job of assembling the available information and dispassionately examining the theories. His is an important book on several counts. For one, Mr. Dallin, through careful, nonideological analysis of the known facts, reaches the disturbing conclusion that mechanical or human error alone almost surely did not cause the plane to stray. Even if the three inertial navigation systems aboard the plane had malfunctioned, the crew would have known they were off course from other flight data, including weather radar which, when placed in ground-mapping mode, a routine procedure during such flights, would have shown the Kamchatka land mass passing below.

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Mr. Dallin finds that none of the other proposed explanations fit all the known facts. A calculated attempt by the crew to save fuel or time seems unrealistic because the potential savings were limited. Hijacking, jamming by the Soviet Union, and crew incapacitation seem even less likely. The idea that the plane was on a mission to take photographs or record radar images of Soviet military bases appears senseless because sophisticated satellites can do the job.

Yet Mr. Dallin cannot rule out the possibility that spying was involved, perhaps in an effort to stimulate the Soviet air defense system, short of having the plane shot down. Although he cannot identify what the exact motive or mission might have been, he concludes, "This possibility must not be ruled out simply because of the political embarrassment which its validation would occasion. In fact, it must be acknowledged that with the passage of time this argument, unlike all others, looms stronger than before." American officials have strenuously denied any involvement with KAL flight 007.

Mr. Dallin moves from the particulars of the flight to a look at the quality of crisis-management in Washington and Moscow following the plane's destruction. He finds little to cheer about. "The crisis over the downing of KAL 007," he says, "thus served as a sort of political Rorschach test which made manifest each elite's propensities, and especially its fears and images of the adversary. Alas, the images on both sides were seriously wide of the mark. If the Soviet image of the United States was close to a caricature, the American image of the Soviet Union — both among government spokespersons and in the media — revealed an amazing lack of knowledge, feel and understanding of the Soviet scene."

Without excusing Soviet conduct, Mr. Dallin suggests that historical and cultural conditioning may have guided each government's response. He says that the Soviet attack on the plane and the efforts to justify it flowed out of the Soviet Union's historical insecurity and paranoia about its frontiers, hair-trigger sensitivities that have not been eased by American intelligence efforts to probe Soviet defenses in recent years. With an American RC-135 surveillance plane operating in the skies off the Kamchatka coast in the hours just before the Korean airliner passed over Soviet territory, flying at one point within 75 miles of the commercial plane, Mr. Dallin concludes that the Russians, at least initially, had good reason to question the identity and intentions of flight 007.

The author believes the American handling of the crisis, particularly the strong denunciations of Soviet behavior by President Reagan, reflected national assumptions about the Soviet Union, including a tendency to expect the worst from Moscow. There was little effort to understand what led the Soviets to act as they did. If anything, he says, the Administration ignored indications that Soviet ground controllers and pilots never knew the plane was a commercial jet. If the reactions of the United States and the Soviet Union during the crisis over the KAL plane were any indication of the superpowers' understanding of each other, as Mr. Dallin clearly feels they were, then the affair offers little encouragement for a substantive improvement in relations despite a recent cooling of cold war rhetoric. □